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ABSTRACT

This paper describes the Pressley Ridge Day School (Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania) for emotionally disturbed/behavior disordered children and youth between the ages of 6 and 21. The physical plant, staff, programs, curriculum, and student eligibility and population are briefly described. Using the philosophy and Re-Education Model developed by Nicholas Hobbs and Campbell Loughmiller, Pressley Ridge operates an experientially-based curriculum component as an additional education resource and treatment intervention. Within the classroom, experiential education staff use experiential approaches and activities to help students build a group culture using group process. Twice each school year, students and teachers from each classroom (with assistance from an experiential education facilitator) plan and execute a 5-day camping trip to the school's own campsite. Group process contributes greatly to the quality of student experience at camp. Back in school, students' camp experiences are applied in positive ways to improve group functioning in the classroom, school, and community. The purpose of this program component is to utilize shared group experiences to foster individual growth through development of group identity and cohesiveness. The camping experience is briefly described. (SAS)

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UTILIZING EXPERIENTIALLY BASED PROGRAMMING IN AN URBAN DAY SCHOOL/DAY TREATMENT SETTING

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Abstract
Information will be presented regarding integrating an experientially based curriculum component into an urban day school/day treatment program for emotionally challenged youth. Workshop participants will engage in spawning new ideas pertaining to increasing the potential effectiveness of such programming for this student/client population. An experiential group activity will be utilized.

Who and What are the Presenters?
The presenters of this workshop (Luke, Rush and Michael) are employees of the Pressley Ridge Day School in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. We are the actual facilitators and implementors of the experiential education program component at the Day School which will be discussed. We make no claims to being experts in the field of experiential education. However, we have directly experienced the growing pains and gains inherent in developing a new program. We see ourselves as "doers" in Dewey's sense of "Men having to do something to things when they wish to find out something; they have to alter conditions..." (Dewey, 1916). We have also had the opportunity to meet intensely with experiential educators/facilitators as consultants. They have assisted us with incorporating experientially based programming and facilitated our reflecting upon and processing our personal experience of the program's dynamics within the context of the Day School.

What is Pressley Ridge Day School?
Established in 1965, the Pressley Ridge Day School/Partial Hospital Program provides education and treatment to 130 emotionally disturbed/behavior disordered children and youth from 45 school districts in a six-county area surrounding Pittsburgh. The program is licensed by the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania to provide both special education and partial hospitalization services. The Day School is located on an 18-acre campus in Pittsburgh. The facility consists of 12 classrooms, a large gymnasium and outdoor athletic field, a kitchen and student cafeteria. There are also administrative offices and facilities for both the Day School and other programs operated by the broader agency, Pressley Ridge Schools. This broader private, not-for-profit organization serves more than 1200 children in four states with a variety of child care, treatment and educational programs. The goal of the Pressley Ridge Day School is to provide intensive, relatively short-term educational and therapeutic services that enable the participating emotionally challenged children and youth to achieve a successful community adjustment.

Who are the Day School's Students?
The Day School is licensed to serve up to 130 students ages 6 to 21 years of age. Eighty-nine percent of our students are 12-18 years old. Sixty-one are ages 14-16. Students are referred to the Day School by local school districts and mental health programs. The school is the most restrictive, nonresidential educational program available in the area and, thus, admits only those students who have been unable to function satisfactorily in a variety of special programs and with a variety of specialized services. All students admitted must meet criteria for "serious emotional disturbance" outlined by the U.S. Office of Education (1977) and must have a diagnosable mental health disorder as described in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (4th ed.) of the American Psychiatric Association. Typically, 68% of our students live

RC 021391

at home with parents or other relatives, while 32% are placed outside their homes due to their needs for additional services. Only about 20% of the student population lives with both natural parents. The students are predominately male (85%), white (64%), and come from low income families (almost 70% earn poverty level incomes or below, according to federal guidelines). The majority of students meet the DSM-IV criteria for conduct or oppositional disorders (76%) and 54% meet the criteria for having attention deficit disorders. In addition, students average 3-4 years below expected grade level at entry into the program even though their intelligence is near normal (average I.Q. = 89). Thirty-seven percent of our students meet the criteria for being considered learning disabled. Twenty-one percent have truancy as a presenting problem.

Who Implements the Program?
The Day School program consists of 11 self-contained classrooms, each with the capacity for 12 students. Two of these classrooms are for dually diagnosed students (developmentally and emotionally challenged). There is also a transition classroom with a capacity of 24 half-day students who also attend public school classes part-time. Each classroom is staffed by a certified special education teacher and a mental health specialist (who may be a special education teacher or a professional in a related field). All classroom staff are titled Teacher/Counselors (T/Cs).

In addition to the classroom staff there are 11 family liaison specialists who work directly with the students, their families, the school districts and other community agencies that are involved with the students. Their primary goal is to strengthen each student's overall ecology so that it can facilitate and support the youth's academic and behavior progress, both during placement and following return to public school. Nine ancillary staff provide instruction in physical education, library skills, art and music, speech and language therapy diagnostic services and tutoring. Three staff facilitate and implement the experiential education program. Program services at the Day School are coordinated by five unit coordinators and supervised by the program director. Additional consultation is provided by three psychiatrists and a psychologist.

What is the Day School's Program?
The overall treatment program provided for students in the Day School consists of a highly structured combination of individual and group procedures, both for educational and mental health services. The Day School is licensed and approved by the Pennsylvania Department of Education and offers comprehensive elementary and secondary curricula in compliance with state regulations. However, long and short-term goals, the classes taken by an individual student, the materials used, and the teaching and evaluation procedures employed are all selected on an individual basis for each child and are specified in the student's Individualized Education Plan (IEP). Because of the highly individualized nature of the educational program, the majority of instruction is conducted on a one-to-one basis.

A student's Mental Health Treatment Plan (MHTP) is developed prior to entry into the program. A combination of a thorough review of prior behavior problems, evaluations by previously involved professionals, and interviews with parents/guardians, advocates and the student are used in devising the MHTP.

The classroom-based treatment program consists of three major components:

1. A classroom point system, which consists of a set of well-defined rules or expectations for behavior, a set of rules governing how points are earned and lost, a specification of reinforcers available, and a set of criteria for earning reinforcers.

2. Specific problem behaviors, academic and social skills deficits are addressed using a variety of individualized interventions, including behavioral contracts, individual and/or small group counseling, skill teaching programs, and at times, a medication regimen prescribed and monitored by program psychiatrists.

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3. A group process program that includes the implementation of a number of group contingency interventions; a series of daily meetings designed to teach planning, evaluation and problem solving skills; and participation in a wide range of group activities designed to foster group development and cohesiveness.

How Does Experiential Education Fit into the Day School program?
The Day School and the numerous other programs Pressley Ridge operates adhere to the philosophy of Nicholas Hobbs and the Re-Education (Re-Ed) model and principles he developed. One of the 12 principles of Re-Ed states: "Trust between child and adult is essential, the foundation on which all other principles rest, the glue that holds teaching and learning together, the beginning point for reeducation." Another principle states: "The group is very important to young people; it can be a major source of instruction in growing up" (Hobbs, 1994). Group process as a treatment component has developed from this principle.

Hobbs states its importance as follows:
"From the beginning of the Re-Ed program, we have emphasized the importance of the group in helping each member of the group grow in competence, confidence, self-esteem and ability to meet the demands of living in home, school, and community. By group process we mean the planned use of identifiable and communicable ways of working so that the group does indeed perform the functions expected of it."

"...The constant challenge in Re-Ed programs is to help groups build cultures that sustain children and adolescents in their efforts to manage their lives in ways satisfying to themselves and satisfactory to others" (Hobbs, 1994).

Elsewhere, Hobbs states, "Camping has from the beginning been an important component of Re-Ed programs. He cites the therapeutic wilderness camp work of Campbell Loughmiller and that of the Outward Bound Schools as inspiring the inclusion of camping in programs for emotionally disturbed youth. He quotes Loughmiller as follows:

"Camp can simplify things, remove kids from school and other settings where defeat and despair have become their constant companions. Camp can give these children new opportunities to learn about themselves and others, about skills they will need to manage in this world. The woods simply provide a congenial setting for adults and young people to live together, guided by principles that have been worked out over 30 years" (Loughmiller, 1979). (Principles that are congruous with those of Re-Ed).

Pressley Ridge has, in fact, operated a therapeutic wilderness school for troubled boys since 1974, based on Loughmiller's work and Re-Ed principles. It is on this 1,300 acre site in south-central Pennsylvania that the Day School established its own campsite in 1994. It consists of four sleep tents which can each accommodate four people. A pow-wow area is adjacent to the sleep tents. There is a dining/activity tent for eating meals, having meetings, doing academics, crafts or playing quiet games. All tents are permanent structures with tin roofs, wood floors and wood stoves. All have electric lighting. Cooking is done over open fires in the kitchen area. Food prep is done there, as well as food storage. There is no electric refrigeration. There is a latrine tent with vault toilets. There are also wood and tool storage areas near the wood sawing/splitting area of the campsite. Finally, there are ready areas outside the dining tent and in the sleep tent area. There are benches arranged in a U-shaped fashion that are the staging sites for all activities. They are also the structured place where problem solving occurs, although "grouping up or huddling up" to handle an issue can be done anywhere at anytime the need arises. The campsite is isolated from the Wilderness School's campsites, parking lot and main buildings. However, it is only a five-minute walk to the School's challenge course which has both high and low elements available for our use.

In the fall of 1994, the Day School implemented an experientially based curriculum component as an additional education resource and treatment intervention. Twice each school year, students and teachers from each classroom (with assistance from an experiential education facilitator) plan and execute a five-

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day camping trip to the School's own campsite. The purpose of this program component is to utilize shared group experiences to foster individual growth through the development of group identity and cohesiveness. Building on these experiences enhances the use of group process(ing) as a powerful educational and therapeutic tool, while at camp and in the classroom.

What kinds of experiential approaches are utilized by the Day School?
First, it is worth noting that experiential activities are utilized as team-building tools throughout Pressley Ridge. In fact, in August 1995, an agency-wide three-a-day experiential workshop was facilitated by Tom Smith, Jackie Gerstein and Craig Dobkin along with a core group of staff they had trained at previous workshops. Now, part of the Day School's ongoing inservice agenda for staff includes experiential activities aimed at building trust, increasing team work, enhancing problem solving skills, and just having fun together. The intention is that as staff become more comfortable and confident with them they will increasingly use experiential activities with our students and their families.

It is also noteworthy that the challenge course the E.E.P uses at camp was constructed by Cradlerock Outdoor Network. Along with Roland and Diamond Associates they have consulted and trained staff as challenge course facilitators for both the high and low elements we have available. Both are respected organizations in the use of this experiential approach.

Regarding the classroom groupings themselves, each E.E.P. staff person works with specific classrooms using experiential approaches and activities to assist them in building a group culture utilizing group process. Ice breakers and trust builders like those in *Silver Bulletts* (Rohnke, 1984) and *Quicksilver* (Rohnke and Butler, 1995), or utilizing Tom Smith's raccoon circles are used, particularly early in the school year when groups are being newly formed. More problem solving and group building initiatives are used as the group begins to trust one another more, and communicate with one another better. And hopefully, as the group becomes more cohesive many aspects of the day can be looked at through an experiential learning cycle, e.g., field trips, work projects, even academic units or bus rides. As Loughmiller put it, "Educationally, the program is (can be) life wide." Academically, it is (can become) an experience curriculum which includes the learning one gets in the classroom, and more." (Loughmiller, 1965). When T/Cs and facilitators begin looking at education and experiences from this point of view, teachable/learnable/therapeutic moments occur increasingly often and they further enhance the sense of individual and group worth when attended to.

Educationally and experientially the program definitely becomes "life wide" when the group begins planning for camp. All manner of individual and group issues arise. Fears and insecurities that are held in check during a six-hour school day suddenly became manifest as the students and T/Cs consider being together for an extended period of time. They are expected to make decisions and commitments which require taking personal responsibility and ownership for one's actions. Facilitators work diligently to have the group accept responsibility for their camping trip. Working through these issues, logistics and commitments with the group definitely challenges the E.E.P. staff in calling upon what Tom Smith calls "peoplework skills," i.e., "being able to demonstrate sensitive listening, and be able to guide individuals (and groups) toward new awareness and personal insights" (Smith, 1993).

Once at camp, which is a 75-mile van ride from the Day School, the process continues and intensifies. Students and T/Cs must now experience the menu, schedule, tent and chore partners, and activities they decided on back at school. Cooking and heating are provided by wood fires, therefore, wood must be sawed, split and hauled. There is no hot water on-demand, nor are there flush toilets, and showers are a half-mile walk uphill. Add to this the potential discomfort of fickle weather/environmental conditions. And the school day doesn't end at 3:00 p.m. Furthermore, familiar comforts and diversions, e.g., T.V., radio, telephone, refrigerator, or street corners are not available. Neither are the escapes of choice of many students available, drugs and alcohol.

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Given our students' backgrounds, obviously issues arise but now there is no going home, or to friends, or to the street to escape/avoid dealing with them. The group is dependent upon itself for meeting its needs and for dealing with its experience of the trip.

Group process contributes importantly to the quality of the experience students and T/Cs have at camp. Besides meeting their survival needs for food, shelter, and heat, the group also has activities ranging from work projects, e.g., trail maintenance, building or repairing a campsite structure, to participating in a challenge course activity, taking a hike, or taking a field trip off campus, e.g., trout fishing, visiting Mt. Davis which is Pennsylvania's highest point, caving, snow tubing or natural water-sliding. All of these activities are front leaded and debriefed. When possible, publishing (Gerstein, 1994) and reflection and future planning are also utilized to solidify the learning associated with the experience. Ritual and celebration are also attended to as enhancing the group and individual experience. For example, every day ends around a pow-wow fire at which time each group member completes their day regardless of how positive or negative it may have been. Groups survive weather, poor planning, challenge course elements, poor cooking, and emotional highs and lows. They also survive individual issues. Whether the group is stronger and more cohesive, however, depends on the skills of the T/Cs and facilitator in assisting the group in moving through the obstacles to being with their experience. To be successful the group must take responsibility for its perception of what they have done/experienced rather than seeing themselves as victims who have been forced to have the camping experience.

Upon returning to school a difficult aspect of the group building process begins: that of utilizing the experiences the students and T/Cs had at camp in positive ways that apply to how the group functions in their classrooms, the broader school, and in the community. Follow-up activities, including celebration, publishing and reflecting are formalized opportunities for solidifying the learning derived from the camp experience. But it is also important to now use camp as a metaphor for how the group functions and for how individuals function within the group.

Is the Experiential Education Component Effective? How Can We Improve its Effectiveness?
Program evaluations are completed the end of each school year by students, Teacher/Counselors and parents. Debriefings are also done at the end of each camping trip with the staff who participated in the trip. During this discussion portion of the presentation a summary of these evaluations and debriefings will be presented. This compilation is not currently available due to the second school year not being complete at the time of this publication. We anticipate that this portion of the workshop will be the most valuable for us and participants. We are hoping it will engage participants in spawning new ideas pertaining to increasing the potential effectiveness of experientially based programming in educational/treatment settings for emotionally challenged youth. Together, we can help these kids create their own cycle of discovery.

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